



# What's in a name?

# Insights into child sex abusers' naming practices on the dark web

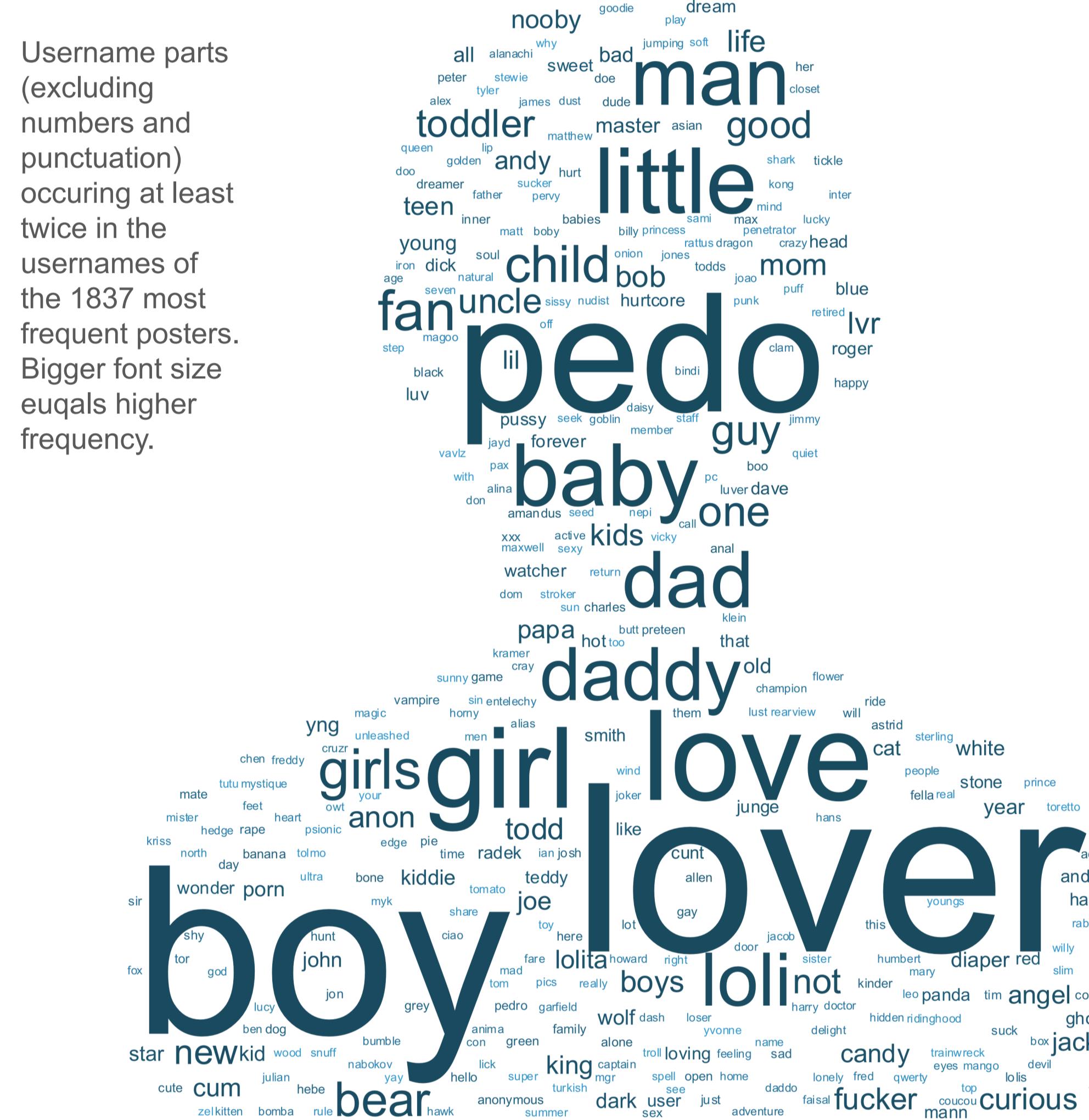
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# The Question

Child sex abusers use the dark web to exchange illicit imagery and to share advice and experiences. As part of their identity work in this high risk/low trust environment, users can make use of a number of resources – linguistic, social, cultural, situational – to form their online identity and create a unique username.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Looking at the examined fora as communities of practice suggest there might be themes and patterns that extend individual naming choices.<sup>4</sup> The work presented below is part of a broader research project analysing the different parts those usernames are comprised of and answering the following question: What kinds of resources do child sex abusers draw on when crafting their usernames and how do they relate to users' discursively performed identities in their respective forum posts?

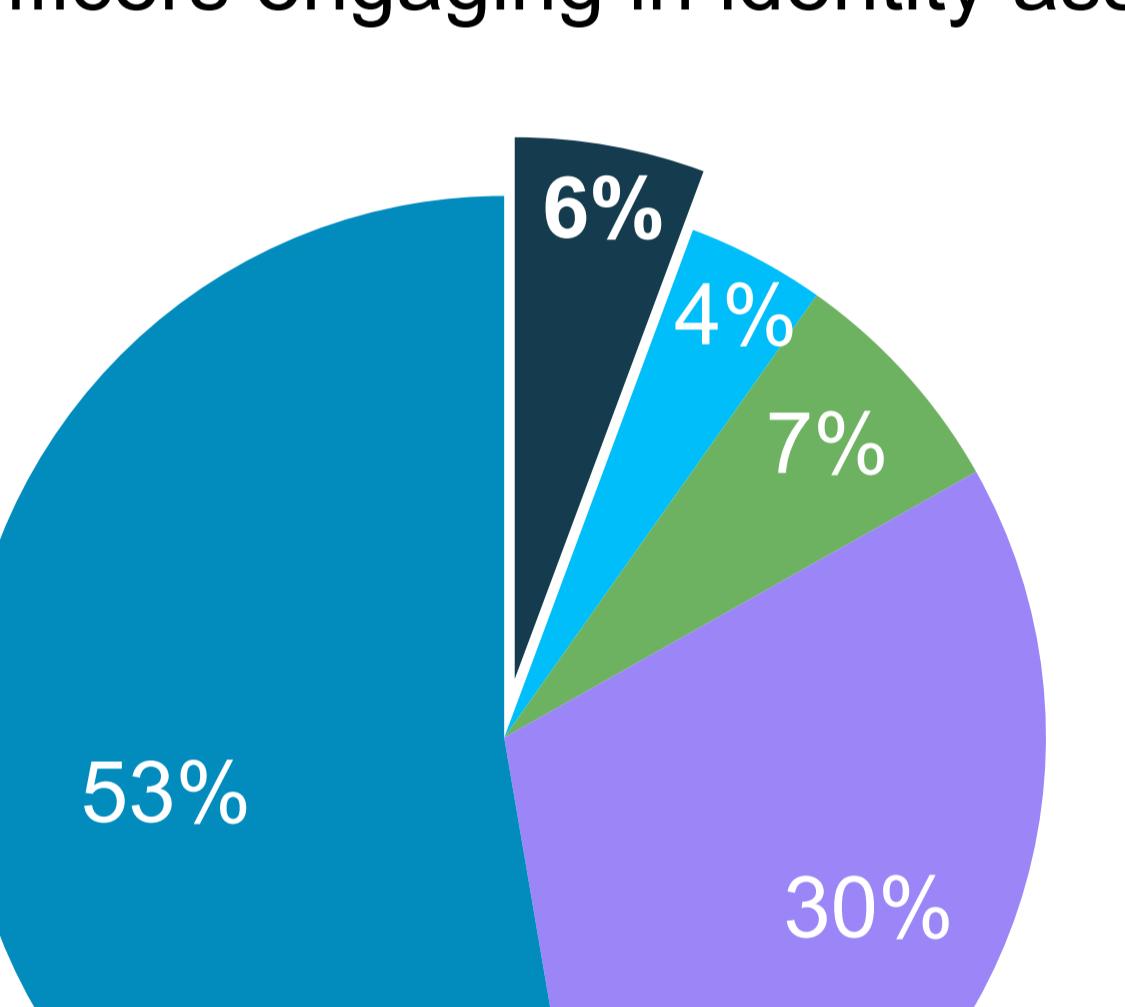
# The Data Set

Number of fora	8
Number of posts	295,799
Number of usernames	32,410
Timeframe (years)	2014-2019
Provided by	Hyperion Gray



# Frequent Posters and Prominent Identity Categories

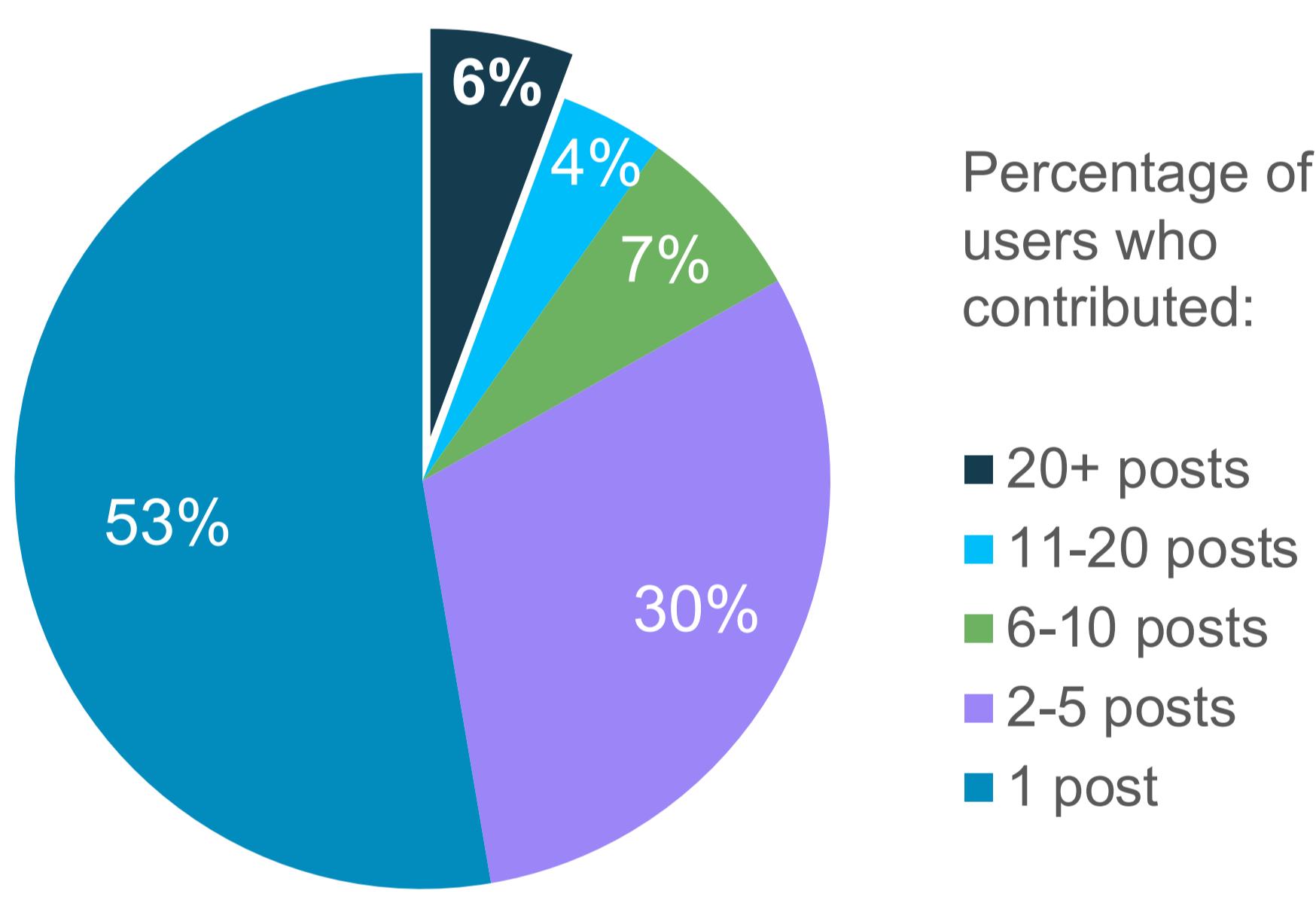
Over half of the users in the data set posted only once within the 6-year period. A further 30% of users posted only 2-5 times. Only 6% of the users (1837 posters) in the data set have provided more than 20 posts. These are what we consider frequent posters for the present study. Frequent posters are of particular interest as law enforcement officers engaging in identity assumption tasks need to know the linguistic customs of the community to gain acceptance and avoid suspicion<sup>1</sup>. Identifying the most common parts and patterns child sex abusers use for their usernames can aid with that task. While many different themes are present among the top usernames, the following stand out and seem particularly relevant for gaining trust and acceptance in these communities: loving vs hurting the child, preference regarding the victim's age and gender, family relations and self-identification as paedophile.



Number of Posts	Percentage
1 post	53%
2-5 posts	30%
6-10 posts	7%
11-20 posts	4%
20+ posts	6%

Percentage of users who contributed:

- 20+ posts
- 11-20 posts
- 6-10 posts
- 2-5 posts
- 1 post



# Themes and Patterns

Over all 32410 usernames, the following themes and patterns have emerged. Those prominent in most frequent posters' usernames are highlighted in red. Particular choices regarding spelling and graphology hint at unique customs of a closed CoP<sup>5</sup>.



# Future Work

## Questions to be addressed going forward:

- What are common collocates of most frequent parts?
- Are there differences between different fora?
- Do users' identity performances in their forum posts match their self-assigned identities from their usernames?
- How do usernames in this particular context compare to usernames in other – both dark and open web – communities?
- What is the significance of gaming references
  - Are there differences in naming practices between different languages used in these communities?

# References

1. Grant, T., & MacLeod, N. (2020). *Language and online identities: The undercover policing of internet sexual crime*. Cambridge University Press.
  2. Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614.
  3. Bamberg, M., Fina, A. D., & Schiffрин, D. (2011). Discourse and identity construction. In *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 177-199). Springer, New York, NY.
  4. Wenger, E. (2011). Communities of practice: A brief introduction.
  5. Sebba, M. (2007). *Spelling and society: The culture and politics of orthography around the world*. Cambridge University Press